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ABSTRACT

When organizational leaders adhere to untested, self-generating beliefs, their ability to achieve desired results can be limited. Although leaders have traditionally been viewed as the bearers of all the answers and have been expected to make all organizational decisions, emerging views of leadership suggest that their role should be to encourage the collective learning of all members of the organization. For leaders to take on this new role, however, they must continuously re-examine their mental models, or images, assumptions, and stories about themselves, others, and their institutions. Leaders who wish to be more effective in their roles must test their own mental models and understand those of other members of the organization. One strategy for understanding the mental model is to become cognizant of the "ladder of inference," or the mental pathway of increasing abstraction, which often leads to misguided beliefs. To become aware of this ladder of inference, leaders should collect observable data and experiences, choose data to be used in formulating the particular inference, add meaning from previous data to the selected data, make assumptions based on this meaning, draw conclusions to adopt a set of beliefs, make decisions based on these beliefs, and use the beliefs to determine what data to select in the next event. Leaders employing this method will improve their ability to be creative while providing leadership. (HAA)

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DOES THE REALITY CREATED BY YOUR PERCEPTIONS ENHANCE OR LIMIT YOUR ABILITY TO WALK THE LEADERSHIP TIGHTROPE?

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Jerrilyn Brewer works as an Instructional Design Specialist in the Curriculum Office at Western Wisconsin Technical College in La Crosse, WI. In this capacity she works with faculty to develop Associate Degree programs which are holistic, performance-based, and employer-focused. Brewer recently completed a doctorate in Educational Administration at the University of Minnesota. Her research investigated the integration of academic and vocational education in postsecondary institutions by surveying 513 faculty and administrators in the Wisconsin Technical College System to determine their attitudes and perceptions with respect to integration. She has previously served as Department Head for the college's Academic Skills Center and has taught at both the secondary and university levels. She does consulting work in the areas of integration, organization and faculty development.

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Linda Schwandt serves as the supervisor of the Mauston Campus of Western Wisconsin Technical College. She is a 1996 graduate of the Wisconsin Leadership Development Institute, a NCCCA Leadership Institute sponsored by the Wisconsin Technical College System. Schwandt previously taught psychology and human development and held the positions of Evaluation Coordinator and Assistant to the Dean of General Education. She holds a doctorate in Educational Administration from the University of Minnesota. Her research focused on the organizational and personal factors that influence the vitality, commitment and innovation of two-year college faculty. Schwandt has a strong interest in professional development and has served as a mentor for several new faculty as well as individuals in the Wisconsin Leadership Identification Program and the Wisconsin Leadership Development Institute.

Does the Reality Created by Your Perceptions Enhance or Limit Your Ability to Walk the Leadership Tightrope?

Introduction

Ideally, leaders serve as conduits for the organizational energy that moves the organization forward. The ability to achieve desired results can, however, be limited when leaders adhere to untested, self-generating beliefs. These beliefs are often based on perceptions that are drawn from observations and past experiences. Perceptions are frequently grounded in adamantly held feelings that one's beliefs are the truth and that this truth is quite obvious. The data one uses to establish the truth are often subjectively selected and may not be accurate.

Traditionally, leaders of organizations have been viewed as having the most complete and accurate perceptions of organizational conditions. In The Fifth Discipline, Peter Senge (1990, p. 340) suggests that "the traditional view of leadership is based on assumptions of people's powerlessness, their lack of personal vision and inability to master the forces of change, deficits which can be remedied only be a few great leaders." Consequently, as the "bearers of all of the answers" these leaders also have been expected to make all organizational decisions. New views of leadership suggest that the leader's role is to encourage the collective learning of all members of the organization so that problem solving and decision making are based upon a perspective greater than that of the positional leader.

Peter Senge (1990. p. 3), proposes "destroying the illusion that the world is created from separate, unrelated forces." He suggests that "our traditional views of leaders--as special people who set the direction, make the key decisions, and energize the troops--are deeply rooted in an individualistic and nonsystemic worldview." As a more contemporary understanding of organizations develops, leaders must re-examine their own perceptions and come to learn from the perceptions of others in the organization. Once leaders understand the value of organizational learning--individual, as well as collective--they will embrace the role of leader as inspirer and teacher, rather than ultimate decision-maker.

Mental Models

For leaders to take on this new role, however, they must commit to their own personal growth, reflection and continuous re-examination of deeply held personal beliefs, values and perceptions. Senge identifies these

perceptions as mental models, one of the five learning disciplines. Mental models (Senge, P., et. al., 1994, p. 235) are "the images, assumptions, and stories which we carry in our minds of ourselves, other people, institutions, and every aspect of the world."

Senge and his colleagues suggest that variations in mental models explain why two people have different interpretations of the same event. These differing interpretations may cause individuals to pay attention to unique details of an event and consequently to choose to react differently to it. These mental models or interpretations are often below the level of conscious awareness and therefore individuals may be unaware of their potential to influence decisions.

Since there is a lack of personal awareness of one's mental models, these perceptions go untested by the individual. When assumptions are untested, they remain unchanged and ultimately may be considered fact. Thus, there is no need to rethink or change one's perceptions. Leaders who desire to be more effective in their roles and to foster the qualities of personal and collective learning in their organizations must begin to test their own mental models and to understand those of other members of the organization.

Ladder of Inference

According to Chris Argyris (1990), the subjectivity of an individual's feelings often creates a barrier which can interfere with the ability to view an event with objectivity and accuracy. One strategy for understanding one's subjective mental models and assumptions, according to Argyris (1990, p. 87) is to become cognizant of one's "ladder of inference," a common mental pathway of increasing abstraction, often leading to misguided beliefs."

Individuals, attempting to simplify their complicated worlds, rely upon mental models that have been developed from past experiences and observations. Rick Ross, writing in Senge, et. al. (1994, p. 242) suggests that these mental models limit effectiveness. He offers as explanation the premise that, "our ability to achieve the results we truly desire is eroded by our feelings that:

- Our beliefs are *the* truth.
- The truth is obvious.
- Our beliefs are based on real data.
- The data we select are the real data."

The ladder of inference can serve as an important tool for leaders who want to improve their communication through reflection and self-analysis. This tool allows leaders to test their assumptions and conclusions. According to

Senge, Argyris and Ross (Senge, et. al., p. 243), when an individual climbs the rungs of the ladder of inference he or she

- collects observable "data" and experiences
- chooses selected data to be used in formulating the inference
- adds meaning derived from previous experience and current expectation to the selected data
- makes assumptions based upon the meaning added to the data
- draws conclusions from the existing assumptions
- using the conclusions that have been drawn, adopts a set of beliefs
- makes decisions and takes action according to the beliefs that have been adopted
- uses the newly adopted beliefs to determine what data to select in the next event

Often this ladder of inference is climbed subconsciously and individuals are unaware of the reflexive nature of using adopted beliefs to influence current action and future perceptions. The ladder of inference can be used by leaders to

- become more aware of their own thinking and reasoning (reflection);
- make their thinking and reasoning more visible to others (advocacy);
- inquire into others' thinking and reasoning (inquiry).

The challenging environment in which today's community college leaders work necessitates that they give consideration to changes in their leadership style and role. Leaders willing to re-examine their own mental models will be more responsive to change and therefore more effective in successfully leading their organizations through it. Leaders aware of how they and others form mental models and arrive at conclusions are able to test effectively their own assumptions and improve their communication with others.

Leaders who learn to employ the ladder of inference to understand how their own mental models and those of others are formed and influence decision making will improve their ability to be creative in bringing change to their organizations and will ultimately walk with ease the tightrope between innovation and leadership.

Resources

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